

CRITICAL NOTICE

Much Ado About ‘Something’

JESSICA WILSON

1. Introduction

Though verificationism and related positivist projects are generally seen as discredited, the constitutive distrust of metaphysics is still felt in contemporary contexts. This is abundantly clear in *Metametaphysics*,¹ where many contributors aim to revive, one way or another, the Carnapian claim that metaphysical debates are either semantically defective (as, e.g., ill-posed or a matter of merely verbal dispute) or insubstantial, in being resolvable (either more-or-less trivially, or empirically) on primarily semantic grounds. Quine’s influence is also pervasively present in this volume: following his criterion of ontological commitment – ‘to be is to be the value of a variable’ ranged over by quantifiers in an appropriately regimented language – nearly all contributors suppose that metaontological questions are best treated by attention, not just to semantics, but more specifically to the semantics of the quantifier(s). So, for example, metaphysical verbal dispute is taken to reflect disputants’ using different (e.g. ‘nihilist’ and ‘compositionalist’) quantifiers, and metaphysical indeterminacy is taken to reflect either the use of a defectively indeterminate quantifier or the availability of multiple equally good though incompatible quantifiers (as per the ‘quantifier variance’ view). Ontological realists also pitch their views in quantificational terms; as Sider puts it, ‘the central question of metaontology is that of whether there are many equally good quantifier meanings, or whether there is a single best quantifier meaning’ (397).

Contributions to this volume more specifically fall into three groups. First are papers broadly in the ‘pessimist’ camp, aiming to develop one or other Carnapian theme, in terms of languages or linguistic frameworks sorted, in a way reflected by the variables of quantification, by distinctive type(s) of entity. Chalmers (in ‘Ontological Anti-realism’) provides a taxonomy of metametaphysical positions in terms of pluralist, lightweight and heavyweight quantification, and develops a framework on which heavyweight ontological discourse is typically defectively indeterminate; Eklund (in ‘Carnap and Ontological Pluralism’) endorses the Carnapian line that metaphysical opponents generally speak from within different linguistic frameworks, but argues that such disputes can be resolved (contra quantifier variance) on purely semantic grounds, with the most expressive language and associated existence claims winning the day; Hirsch (in ‘Ontology and Alternative Languages’) presents his view

1 *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, edited by David J. Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. x + 530 pp. £60.00 cloth, £25.00 paper). Except where otherwise noted, all parenthetical references are to this work.

of verbal disputes as characterized by intensionally coarse-grained intertranslatability, taking the nihilist/compositionalist debate as a case in point; Hofweber (in 'Ambitious, Yet Modest, Metaphysics') first connects the Carnapian supposition that metaphysical questions asked 'internal' to a framework are insubstantial with the methodological supposition that metaphysicians should not meddle with other theories, then argues that (though a distinction between 'domain-entailing' and 'inference-ticket' readings of the quantifier provides an initial ray of hope) nothing substantive is left for metaphysicians to do; Price (in 'Metaphysics after Carnap: The Ghost Who Walks') argues that neither Quine's arguments against the analytic/synthetic distinction nor his concerns about Carnap's type-theoretic pluralism undermine Carnap's anti-metaphysical arguments; in a similar vein Soames (in 'Ontology, Analyticity, and Meaning: the Quine-Carnap dispute') argues that Quine's pragmatism, and his related agreement with Carnap that theories differing only in 'non-observational statements' are equivalent, indicate that Carnap and Quine were in line so far as deep metaphysics is concerned; Thomasson (in 'Answerable and Unanswerable Questions') argues that Carnapian insubstantialism is motivated by a theory of reference taking 'frame-level application conditions' to be built into nominal terms; Yablo (in 'Must Existence Questions have Answers?') argues that insofar as the truth or correctness of sentences containing number terms is independent of whether number terms refer, both the question of reference and the related question of whether numbers exist are objectively indeterminate. As you can see, that's a lot of pessimists. Indeed, 27 pages of Manley's useful 36-page introduction is devoted to discussing these Carnapian variations. (Manley's introduction is especially valuable since the papers are in the volume sorted alphabetically, which makes for an interesting but scattershot straight-through read.)

In the second group are papers broadly in the 'optimist' camp. Here the topics vary but share with pessimists the supposition that metametaphysical questions are best treated in semantic and quantificational terms. Hawthorne (in 'Superficialism in Ontology') expresses concerns about the semantic presuppositions of Hirsch's translation-based account of verbal disputes; Hale and Wright (in 'The Metaontology of Abstraction') reject claims that Fregean abstractionism requires quantifier variance; McDaniel (in 'Ways of Being') develops the Heideggerian idea that there are many fundamental ways of being, interpreting this as the view that there are multiple equally fundamental ontological quantifiers; Sider (in 'Ontological Realism') argues that ontological discourse involves a single distinguished quantifier, that determinately tracks the natural ontological joints in a way that is largely independent of facts of language use; van Inwagen (in 'Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment') affirms Quine's criterion of ontological commitment and applies it, on 'failure-of-nominalist-paraphrase' grounds, to the case of abstracta. Here it is worth registering Sider's characterization (one of the few on offer here) of the sort of 'mainstream metaphysics' to which pessimists are opposed:

Competing positions are treated as tentative hypotheses about the world, and are assessed by a loose battery of criteria for theory choice. Match with ordinary usage and belief sometimes plays a role in this assessment, but typically not a dominant one. Theoretical insight, considerations of simplicity, integration with other domains (for instance science, logic, and philosophy of language), and so on, play important roles. (358)

Lastly are papers again broadly in the optimist camp, but which depart, to some extent, from the standard assumption that quantification holds the key to most metaphysical questions. Fine (in ‘The Question of Ontology’) distinguishes quantificational questions about what there is (which he supposes to be insubstantial, as occurring in ordinary language, mathematics, etc.) from ontological questions about what really exists; Schaffer (in ‘On What Grounds What’) similarly endorses insubstantialism for ordinary existence claims, and locates the substantive aspect of metaphysical deliberation in the question of what depends on (‘grounds’) what, where the notion of grounding is metaphysically primitive; Bennett (in ‘Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology’), argues that while there is no in-principle problem with metaphysical debate, some such debates may have reached epistemic impasse.

What’s the upshot for metaphysics or metametaphysics as a result of these investigations? Overall, not as much as one might hope for. Let me hasten to add that there is much of piece-wise interest in the discussions here: every paper is worth reading, for one reason or another. Still, or so I will argue, due to certain problematic metametaphysical presuppositions most of these discussions miss the deeper mark, on the pessimist as well as the optimist side. My reasons for thinking this come from considering how best to answer three metametaphysical questions. First, why be pessimistic about metaphysics – why be Carnapian in a post-positivist age? There is, I’ll suggest, a post-positivist strategy for reviving Carnapian pessimism, but it is almost entirely neglected here; and the motivations that pessimists offer instead are not compelling. Second, why think that the best way to approach metametaphysical questions is by attention to features of language, and in particular to quantifier semantics, in ordinary or ontological language(s)? Here again we are offered little motivation for this supposition, which, notwithstanding its acceptance by nearly all contributors, faces clear difficulties. Third, granting that quantification is somehow bound up with first-order questions about what exists, what is the nature of this connection, and what are the associated implications for metametaphysics? Here I find the accounts of the connection on offer implausible, especially as compared to an alternative that makes better sense of metaphysical practice and disagreement.

The moral following consideration of these questions is that real progress in metametaphysics is likely to occur less by attention to semantic issues pertaining to representation, translation and quantification and more to non-semantic issues pertaining to epistemology and metaphysical determinacy. Notwithstanding this difficulty in general focus, *Metametaphysics* is recommended, for three reasons. First, as I say, much in these papers is of considerable intrinsic interest. Second, even if I am right that the broadly semantic theorizing on offer here is less than illuminating from a metametaphysical point of view, negative results are still results (and after all, I might be wrong, in which case you will want to be familiar with this material). Third, there are seeds for more profitable direction in several of the contributions, which I discuss in a closing section.

2. *Why be Pessimistic about Metaphysics – Why be Carnapian in a Post-positivist Age?*

As is familiar, Carnap (1950–56) claimed that there is a distinction in kinds of ontological question, expressible by appeal to the notion of a linguistic framework: a

language with semantic rules sufficient to engage in verificationistically acceptable discourse. So, for example, the physical object framework is partly constituted by rules for empirically (a posteriori synthetically) confirming the existence of physical objects (a table, electrons), and the numbers framework is partly constituted by rules for logically (analytically) confirming the existence of numbers (5, primes over 100). Carnap's distinction between ontological questions is then cashed as a distinction between questions asked either 'internal' to some framework or 'external' to any framework: internal questions typically make sense, as having associated analytic or synthetic verification conditions, whereas external questions do not have associated verification conditions, and so never make sense. Metaphysical questions are, by Carnap's lights, paradigmatically external questions; hence his metaphysical pessimism.

Carnap's supposition that external questions are meaningless appears to rely on a verificationist theory of meaning now generally discredited. So why be neo-Carnapian?

I want to start by noting one reason for *not* being neo-Carnapian that some allegedly accept but which is not, after all, any good. This is that Quine's problematizing of the analytic/synthetic distinction undermined Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions, placing metaphysics on the same footing as science (or, heaven forbid, vice versa). In fact, Quine's argument against Carnap, which he sets out in his (1951a), doesn't work. Here is what appears to be the core of Quine's argument:

No more than the distinction between analytic and synthetic is needed in support of Carnap's doctrine that the statements commonly thought of as ontological, viz., statements such as 'There are physical objects'; 'There are classes'; 'There are numbers', are analytic or contradictory given the language The contrast which he wants between those ontological statements and empirical existence statements such as 'There are black swans' is clinched by the distinction of analytic and synthetic. True, there is in these terms no contrast between analytic statements of an ontological kind [e.g., 'There are numbers'] and other analytic statements of existence such as 'There are prime numbers above a hundred'; but I don't see why he should care about this . . . if there is no proper distinction between analytic and synthetic, then no basis at all remains for the contrast which Carnap urges between ontological statements and empirical statements of existence. Ontological questions then end up on a par with questions of natural science. (210–11)

An immediate concern about the anti-Carnapian bearing of this argument is that it doesn't obviously concern the internal/external distinction: in the first instance, what Quine takes the failure of the analytic/synthetic distinction to undermine is the distinction between 'category' and 'subclass' claims each of which are asked *internal* to a framework, where the former are 'analytic or contradictory given the language' and the latter are at least sometimes synthetic (as in the physical object framework).

In fact, Quine does take the internal/external distinction to be undermined by his case against the analytic/synthetic distinction, albeit indirectly, via the category/subclass distinction. 'External questions', he says (207), 'are the category questions conceived as propounded before the adoption of a given language', while 'internal questions

comprise the subclass questions and, in addition, the category questions when these are construed as treated within an adopted language as questions having trivially analytic or contradictory answers'. In the second instance, then, Quine's argument is as follows:

- (1) The distinction between 'internal' and 'external' questions relies on the distinction between 'category' and 'sub-class' questions.
- (2) The distinction between category and sub-class questions relies on the analytic/synthetic distinction, as follows: if a category question has an answer, that answer is analytic or contradictory, whereas some sub-class questions – e.g., 'there are black swans' – may have synthetic answers.²
- (3) The analytic/synthetic distinction cannot be maintained.
- (4) The category/subclass distinction cannot be maintained. (2, 3)
- (5) The internal/external distinction cannot be maintained. (1, 4)
- (6) Hence (in particular) physics and metaphysics are on a par.

This argument doesn't go through either, however. The problem concerns (2), for *qua* verificationist Carnap need not commit himself to the characterization of category questions as, if meaningful, either analytic or contradictory. All Carnap requires for meaningfulness is that there be some way of verifying the existence of a posited entity; he need not suppose that every framework is therefore analytically committed to there being any entities satisfying the verification conditions.³ So, for example, in the physical object framework there may be no analytic statement of existence, either fundamental (as stipulated by a semantic rule) or derived (as logically following from some such rules). So, contra (2), it need not be the case that category questions are distinguished from subclass questions in having answers that are either analytic or contradictory. Hence from the failure of the analytic/synthetic distinction it does not follow, contra (4), that the category/subclass distinction cannot be maintained, nor, contra (5), that the internal/external distinction cannot be maintained. In that case it is unclear how a blurring of the analytic/synthetic distinction would, in itself, put physics and metaphysics on a par.

There is, to be sure, a connection between the analytic/synthetic and internal/external distinctions, but this connection turns out to be irrelevant to Carnap's critique of metaphysics. As above, a linguistic framework need not contain any analytic existence claims; however, it arguably must contain *some* analytic claims; namely, those associated with whatever rules are constitutively individuating of the framework. Assuming that the analytic/synthetic distinction is problematic, then so will be Carnap's account of how frameworks are individuated. But – again, *qua* verificationist – Carnap could grant that frameworks should rather be holistically individuated (as Price and Soames note in their contributions), while maintaining that there remains a crucial difference between metaphysics and science: namely, that scientific existence claims and questions always take place in *some or other* linguistic framework, unlike metaphysical claims and questions which, on Carnap's understanding,

- 2 Quine appears to suppose that category questions asked outside any framework may be understood as hypothetically analytic or contradictory, dependent upon which framework is adopted.
- 3 To be sure, some frameworks (e.g. the number framework) are plausibly supposed to include existence claims among the semantic rules; but it doesn't follow that every framework does (much less must do) so.

take place outside of any framework and so are both verificationistically unacceptable and (as Eklund notes, potentially incoherently) ‘outside of language’, so to speak.

It is with respect to Carnap’s supposition that metaphysical questions are asked external to any framework that we find a real point of disagreement between Quine and Carnap, relevant to the viability of a contemporary Carnapianism. In his (1951a) work, Quine also claims that Carnap’s supposition that variables are sorted by types is arbitrary, in that one may rather characterize a language (as with, e.g., Zermelo’s set theory) ‘carrying no distinctions in types of variables, [such that] all questions regarding the acceptance not only of numbers in general but of abstract entities in general, or of physical objects in general, would become subclass questions’ (209). As I’ll later suggest, the relativist aspect of this claim is in tension with Quine’s supposition that ontological commitment can be read off quantificational structure. But at present what I want to draw to attention is that such a linguistic framework – characterized using a single very general variable, which is then associated with entities of different types – would seem to be tailor-made for the sort of framework that could be shared, in principle, by metaphysicians disagreeing about whether, for example, numbers or tables exist. Even granting Carnap that ontological assertions made outside any framework are meaningless, why think that ontological questions *are* asked outside any framework? Why not rather maintain that metaphysicians *do* have their standards of verification, vague and inchoate as they may be, which potentially direct and determine the course of substantive debate? Relatedly: even if Carnap is right that certain existence questions are not genuinely substantive, in virtue of being trivially or empirically confirmable by reference to semantic rules, why suppose that all internal existence questions are similarly insubstantive? Why not allow that a framework might be introduced with the explicit aim of identifying, either fundamentally or non-fundamentally, what ‘really’ exists?

Carnap’s reason for denying that metaphysical disputes take place within a shared framework is the true north of his criticism of metaphysics, and turns on his supposition that there are no shared standards of evidence sufficient to generally determine the outcome of metaphysical debate.⁴ Hence he says, toward the end of his (1950–56) work:

Suppose that one philosopher says: ‘I believe that there are numbers as real entities’ His nominalistic opponent replies: ‘You are wrong: there are no numbers’ I cannot think of any possible evidence that would be regarded as relevant by both philosophers, and therefore, if actually found, would decide the controversy or at least make one of the opposite theses more probable than the other. (254)

4 Here I disagree with Price, who in his contribution supposes that Carnap’s rejection of there being ‘a single existential quantifier, allowed to range over anything at all’ reflects Carnap’s thinking that there is ‘some sort of category mistake involved in assimilating issues of the existence of classes, say, and the existence of physical objects’. Carnap’s reason for thinking that metaphysical questions are external is epistemological, not ‘logical-syntactical’: the epistemological concern would remain even if he were to allow quantifiers to range over multiple categorical types. The problem with metaphysical claims, as Carnap sees it, is not that their rules of verification somehow render them unfit to be part of a shared framework, but that they do not have any such rules and so are unfit to be part of *any* framework.

Ultimately, then, Carnap's pessimism about metaphysics is grounded in a distinctly *epistemological* concern; and this concern easily survives the contemporary rejection of positivism and verificationism as adequate theories either of meaning or explanation. Do metaphysicians share a single set of evidential standards? And if so, are these standards likely to eventuate in a determinate answer to metaphysical questions? Post-positivism, the answers to these questions remain as pressing as ever. Hence it is, as Sider notes in a continuation of his characterization of mainstream metaphysics:

Worries about contemporary ontology begin as worries about its epistemology The main ontological positions seem internally consistent and empirically adequate, so all the weight of theory-choice falls on the criteria; but are the criteria up to the task? What justifies the alleged theoretical insights? Are criteria that are commonly used in scientific theory (for example, simplicity and theoretical integration) applicable in metaphysics? How can these criteria be articulated clearly? And what hope is there that the criteria will yield a determinate verdict, given the paucity of empirical evidence? (385)

Unfortunately, while pessimists here typically follow Carnap in supposing that disputing metaphysicians do not speak from within a shared framework, they neither present nor develop his broadly epistemological motivations for this supposition. Optimists here are equally reticent about the methodological issues, notwithstanding that these issues are not resolved by taking the evidential and theoretical standards of metaphysics to be relevantly like those of the sciences (as continuing concerns about the underdetermination of scientific theory by evidence suggest); Sider, for example, does not much engage with the concerns he raises beyond maintaining that '[w]e ought to believe in an objective structure to reality' (397) which may be tracked by a distinguished and perfectly natural ontological quantifier. Only Bennett's contribution treats the methodological issues in any detail, in addressing the concern (not as Carnapian *per se*, but no matter) that theoretical standards of simplicity and strength may be insufficient to settle certain metaphysical disputes.

Neo-Carnapian pessimists here offer various alternative motivations for their pessimism, but none of these is compelling.

First and foremost are certain deflationary intuitions that, according to Manley, 'threaten the robustly realist approach that is dominant today' (3). One such intuition is that metaphysical disputes are lacking in content. As Chalmers puts it:

Say that we know all about the qualitative properties of two objects – two cups, say – and the qualitative relations between them, leaving out any properties and relations concerning objects that they jointly compose. There is a strong intuition that we are thereby in a position to know *everything* relevant there is to know about the objects. There is no deep further truth concerning whether the objects compose a further object (a cupcup, say) of which we are potentially ignorant. The question of whether there is a cupcup is a matter for bookkeeping or for semantic decision, perhaps, but it is not a matter for discovery. (78)

Hirsch (2002) pushes a similar line: 'Look at your hand while you are clenching it, and ask yourself whether some object called a fist has come into existence. . . . The first thought that must come to mind when we ask this question is this: There can't be anything deep or theoretical here' (67). Speaking for myself, such cases leave open

various substantive metaphysical questions; and indeed Chalmers suggests that it is mainly those ‘outside the field of ontology’ who are prone to see further questions as insubstantive. I suspect that (allowing, as Chalmers does, for dualistic exceptions) those having such intuitions may be tacitly presupposing some form of bottom-up metaphysical reductionism. It would be ironic if metametaphysical pessimism were inspired by tacit commitment to a metaphysical thesis. In any event, taking metaphysical disputes to be typically failed attempts to speak across quantificational voids may be explanatory, at least, of why those having intuitions of insubstantiality do so. But given that those *in* the field of ontology don’t share these intuitions, why suppose that a metametaphysical view codifying such intuitions is on the right track?

Another deflationary intuition, cited here by several pessimists (see Yablo 2000 for an early expression) is that metaphysical disputes are contentful, but trivially resolved. Hofweber appeals to this intuition in developing what he sees as the primary concern with metaphysics – namely, that it doesn’t have a distinctive domain of investigation. Doesn’t mathematics, in establishing that there are infinitely many prime numbers, thereby establish that there are numbers? Doesn’t science, in identifying processes associated with melting and boiling, thereby establish that change is possible? Supposing so, then (in the usual Carnapian terms) the questions metaphysicians ask will already have answers within some framework or other, given by standards internal to the framework. But such an insubstantialist motivation for metaphysical pessimism is not compelling, for we cannot always take the supposed posits of ordinary or theoretical languages at face value. There may be hidden inconsistencies with a given posit within a framework (as with, e.g., ordinary assumptions involving strict identity of persons, as per Parfit 1971), or claims from different domains may conflict (as with, e.g., ordinary and scientific understandings of space and time). In such cases of internal or external conflict, which characteristically drive metaphysical debate, we cannot assume that the posits of a theory are trivially acceptable. To be sure, there is an important metametaphysical question here (to which we will return), concerning how potentially revisionary metaphysics should be as regards other domains of investigation. But given the fact of internal and external conflict, that some domains of discourse have ready answers to certain metaphysical questions doesn’t provide even *prima facie* motivation for thinking that metaphysics has no substantive job to do.⁵

Three other motivations for pessimism are worth noting. First is Chalmers’s ‘conceivability’ argument:

If there is a nondefective absolute quantifier, then both nihilism and universalism are conceivable: neither of them can be reduced to contradiction by a priori reasoning. But what cannot be ruled out is possible (setting aside Kripkean two-dimensional phenomena that are irrelevant here). Nihilism and universalism are not both possible. So there is no nondefective absolute quantifier. (104)

As Chalmers acknowledges, this argument appeals to various controversial premises characteristic of modal rationalism, including that all truths are a priori entailed by fundamental truths, and that (Kripkean exceptions aside) whatever cannot be ruled out a priori is possible. Without entering into details of Chalmers’s defence (in other

5 A Carnapian might respond by claiming that posits or claims in different frameworks cannot conflict. This is certainly the Carnapian line, but what we are looking for is post-positivist reason to believe this line, and its associated anti-metaphysical implications.

work) of these premises, it is nonetheless clear that they are reasonably denied. First, Chalmers's main motivation for these premises (see his 2006) reflects his wanting to ensure that we have rational access to the space of possibility, in order to make sense of certain modally implicated practices; but accommodating these practices doesn't require anything near as strong a link as modal rationalism presumes – nor could it, given that we do not presently inhabit anything like the ideal circumstances requisite for the premises to be even *prima facie* plausible. Second, if these premises entail that there are no facts of the matter about what really exists, either fundamentally or non-fundamentally, then – one might reasonably maintain – so much the worse for the premises: plausibly, we have more reason to believe that there are facts about what really exists than that what is *a priori* conceivable is genuinely possible, or that theses such as nihilism and universalism are necessary, if true.

Second, Hirsch takes ontological pluralism to be motivated by a Davidsonian principle of translational charity, coupled with acceptance of a 'top-down' intensional semantics according to which the basic units of meaning are sets of possible worlds; roughly, the suggestion is that on such a semantics certain metaphysical disputants are charitably seen as speaking 'alternative' languages, such that 'speakers of either language ought to allow that speakers of the other language assert sentences that have the same characters and the same truth-values as the sentences that they themselves assert' (242). Here again, the premises are easily denied. As Hawthorne notes, the assumption that proponents of competing ontological views are speaking intertranslatable languages fails to reflect that competing views typically differ as regards what *de re* distinctions between qualitative duplicate worlds are countenanced; moreover, 'the face value evidence does seem to count against the intension-centric approach to semantics...[H]ave we been given any good reason whatever to opt for the intension-centric view of cognitive significance?' (228). One might attempt to develop an 'alternative languages' view without Hirsch's semantic assumption, but then the supposition of intertranslatability is even less plausible.⁶

Finally, Thomasson suggests that metaphysical pessimism is motivated by an account of reference (more generally: application) supposed to overcome certain problems with a causal theory of such. Most crucially, a causal theory of reference faces a problem of indeterminacy: since we stand in any number of causal connections to entities in the world, how can acts of dubbing hone in on the intended referent? On Thomasson's preferred amendment to the theory, nominal terms typically have 'frame-level' (category-sensitive) application conditions, whose satisfaction guarantees existence of an entity of the type. The attendant conception of metaphysics is thus Carnapian in taking metaphysics to be either primarily descriptive, as involving conceptual analysis aimed at identifying conditions of use for terms of interest, or else – in cases where use leaves open certain questions that metaphysicians think need answers – broadly pragmatic, in offering up suggestions concerning how we might better use our terms. I will later argue that extensions of language that metaphysicians may be in position to recommend are not best seen as pragmatically driven. In any case, problems of causal-referential failure don't motivate taking nominal terms (or associated quantificational variables) to have built-in application conditions, since incorporating

6 One might additionally observe (as Chris Tillman did) that the assumption of intertranslatability is not especially 'charitable', in entailing that metaphysicians (in rejecting their supposed opponents' views) are typically contradicting themselves.

such conditions is neither sufficient nor necessary for determinate reference: not sufficient, since even if a term is associated with category-level application conditions, reference may fail if there are multiple entities satisfying the conditions in the vicinity ('there's a whale!', in a context where the head of one whale and the tail of another is visible); and not necessary, since reference may succeed even when associated with no or with incorrect category-level conditions ('there's a planet!', uttered – incorrectly, it turns out – when pointing to Pluto).

3. *Why Treat Metametaphysical Questions in Semantic or Quantificational Terms?*

Why think that attention to quantificational features of language is the right way to investigate the nature of metaphysical practice and dispute?

There is certainly room for scepticism on this score. After all, metaphysical questions appear to be about what there is, what it is like, and how existing entities are related. What do such questions have to do with language? Indeed, even granting (as most do here) that there are (e.g. ordinary or mathematical) contexts where metaphysical issues are beside the point, one might be concerned, as is Fine, that the supposition that ontological questions are quantificational questions would fail to accommodate the *prima facie* understanding of ontological questions as substantive, philosophical and autonomous; that is, as non-trivially answered on the basis of philosophical enquiry, in a way largely independent of answers to homophonic questions asked in the non-philosophical 'home' language:

Suppose we answer the quantificational question in the affirmative. We go along with the mathematician in asserting that there are prime numbers between 7 and 17, for example, or go along with the scientist in asserting that this chair is partly composed of electrons. Then surely the ontological questions of interest to philosophy will still arise. (159)

One might respond to this concern, as optimists typically do, by introducing a distinguished ontological quantifier or quantifiers; but what's the point of approaching first- or second-order metaphysical questions from a quantificational point of view if one has to introduce a new form of language in order to plausibly do so?

Moreover, if an area other than metaphysics has clear bearing on metametaphysics, it would appear to be epistemology, not semantics. As above, Carnap's deeper problem with metaphysics was methodological, not semantic. Why not engage with the epistemological issues directly, especially given that meaning and methodology come apart?

Nor does Quine's famous dictum motivate the quantificational approach; as Quine (1951b) insists, his dictum 'explicates only the *ontological commitments* of a theory and not the *ontological truth* about the world' (12). Only if we were in possession of an ideal, nature-revealing language would his dictum be a guide to what there is, as opposed to what a theory says there is. Quine also suggests, in complaining that Carnap's supposition that variables are sorted by types is arbitrary, that a single theory may admit of multiple interpretations – as involving, for example, multiple variables of quantification, or only a single variable, instances of which are then predicatively restricted, as need be. But if the quantificational structure of a theory

is so flexible, then Quine's dictum should be understood yet more weakly, as explicating only the commitments of a specific interpretation of a theory, as opposed to the theory *simpliciter*. If we are to extract ontological results from Quine's dictum, we must have reason, first, to think that a given theory has a privileged interpretation (a.k.a. 'regimentation'), and second, to think that the theory, so interpreted, is a trustworthy guide to reality. But how are such issues to be decided? Plausibly, metaphysical considerations will play a key role at both steps. So, for example, the ontological status of properties will likely bear on whether the proper interpretation of a theory should include second-order variables of quantification, and general metaphysical considerations will bear on whether predicative claims in a candidate interpretation are tracking genuine features or are mere *façons de parler*. Here it is worth recalling that Quine's favoured application of his dictum assumes, on nominalist grounds that remain hotly debated, that predicates do not encode properties, metaphysically understood.

Both Finean and Quinean considerations suggest that there is no shortcut to ontological or metaphysical results by attention to language. To the extent that a given language is useful for doing first-order metaphysics, this is because it has appropriately incorporated previous metaphysical results: no metaphysics in, no metaphysics out. But if language is not key to metaphysics, why think it key to metametaphysics?

To be sure, some metaphysical claims are conveniently expressed in semantic terms. If you, but not I, believe Zeus exists, and if the truth-conditional semantics for claims involving a proper name requires that the named entity exist, then by semantic ascent we can avoid my being committed to Zeus by interpreting my claim that Zeus doesn't exist as the metalinguistic claim that 'Zeus' doesn't refer. Pessimist accounts of metaphysical disagreement may be inspired by this model, as indicating that disputants aren't really speaking the same language. Still, there are other options for making sense of such disagreement, by, for example, rejecting that truth-conditional semantics generally requires that singular terms refer, or along interpretive lines of the account of genuine metaphysical disagreement I will later propose.

A metametaphysical claim conveniently expressed in semantic terms is that metaphysical claims tacitly presuppose an 'ontological' quantifier or quantifiers, different from those at issue in ordinary language or in non-metaphysical theories, such that, for example, 'making an ordinary existence assertion does not commit a subject to a corresponding ontological existence assertion' (Chalmers *et al.*, 87). Such a claim appears to respect the intuition of Hofweber, Lewis and others that metaphysics should not meddle in other disciplines, while maintaining a distinctive role for metaphysics as aiming to identify the deeper structure of reality. If metaphysical claims really do involve a distinctive quantifier or quantifiers, then metaphysicians can and perhaps should leave other domains of discourse alone – let them go insubstantive, as the case may be (though of course the aforementioned problems of intra- or inter-discourse incompatibility will not thereby go away). Such a hands-off view, coupled with the posit of ontologically distinctive quantifiers, is endorsed by various optimists, including McDaniel and Sider.

Still, while one can express the hands-off view by distinguishing ordinary and ontological quantifiers, one need not do so. Fine, for example, endorses the view while rejecting that metaphysical claims involve a distinctive form of quantification. Alternatively, why not follow Hume in observing that there is metaphysics, and there

is backgammon, and that for various reasons we may find it convenient to continue engaging in the latter, notwithstanding certain results of the former?

More to the metametaphysical point, the hands-off view is an unuseful fiction. The posits and presuppositions of metaphysics frequently inform science, maths and logic, often to good effect, as the historically close and continuing relationship between metaphysics and these other disciplines bears out; and results from all these disciplines inform ordinary language. And surely, there are ways of making sense of interdisciplinary engagement on which metaphysics is neither hegemonous over nor irrelevant to other areas. Suppose (methodological concerns aside) that metaphysical investigation in the limit of inquiry indicates that numbers don't really exist; and suppose we do not want this result to undermine the usual mathematical claims. Rather than maintain that metaphysics and maths have nothing to do with one another, why not take the metaphysical result as evidence that the mathematical claims are true in virtue of facts – plausibly, cardinality and associated relational facts – which are neutral on the existence of numbers? One could try to express this more integrated stance in terms of quantifiers that are not completely divorced from one another, but what would be the point? The issues here are metaphysical and methodological – not semantic.

4. Granting that Quantification is Somehow Bound Up with Facts about What Exists, What Exactly is the Connection, and What is its Bearing on Metametaphysical Questions?

Though there is little reason to think that metaphysical or metametaphysical questions are best explored through the lens of language, the question remains: what is the connection between talk about what there is – i.e. the meaning of the quantifier(s) – and what exists? And what is the bearing of this connection on metametaphysical questions about what metaphysicians take themselves to be doing, and whether sense can be made of metaphysical disagreement?

There are three accounts of the connection between quantifiers and existence facts on offer here. According to the first, the meaning of the quantifier is semantically determinate, and such as to guarantee, on primarily semantic grounds, the existence of entities meeting certain verification or application conditions; this is the view commonly endorsed both by neo-Carnapian pessimists and by 'hands-off' optimists for non-metaphysical quantifiers. On this view, when I utter 'There are numbers' in a maths class, the truth of what I say follows trivially from mathematical truths such as 'There are infinitely many prime numbers'; and when I utter 'There are tables' in a store, the truth of what I say follows if the empirical application conditions for tables are there met. The second account, typically endorsed by optimists, takes there to be a direct, non-stipulative connection between the ontological quantifier(s) and whatever real existents there may be. Here again the quantifier is semantically determinate, but the truth of associated existence claims depends on the world and its proper joints. On this view, when I utter 'There are numbers' or 'There are tables' in the ontology room, the truth of what I say depends on whether there are in fact numbers or tables. The third account, endorsed by certain pessimists (Thomasson, Yablo), takes certain quantifiers (or associated nominal terms) to be semantically indeterminate, though extendible in principle on pragmatic grounds. On this view, my utterance of 'There are

numbers' may be either meaningless (if the quantifier is indeterminate) or trivially true/false (if pragmatic extension has occurred).

None of these accounts makes decent sense of metaphysical practice or disagreement. For languages with insubstantialist quantificational structure, metaphysics is (perhaps empirically informed) conceptual analysis; and metaphysical debate is correspondingly understood as involving either disagreement about semantic facts (if occurring within a framework), or else as merely verbal (if occurring, à la Hirsch, between intertranslatable frameworks). But metaphysics is the study of reality, not concepts, and barring the truth of encompassing idealism these studies are distinct. Optimists endorsing insubstantialism for the quantifiers of ordinary language and various other theories also fail to make sense of metaphysical practice. As previously, the hands-off attitude renders incomprehensible the typically heavy reliance on extra-metaphysical claims as input into metaphysical theorizing, at least at the *prima facie* level. It also ignores the metaphysician's real claim to fame – or at least to respect; namely, that of providing a systematic, foundational and comprehensive basis for understanding reality in a way that judiciously incorporates the seemingly diverse ways (perceptual, sub-atomic, mathematical, linguistic and so on) in which reality may manifest itself.

Metaphysical influence to and fro aside, one might suppose that the second account, positing distinguished ontological quantifiers, would make better sense of metaphysical practice and disagreement. But that it does so is unclear. To start, the account faces the question of what mechanism exists whereby language automatically tracks reality; and even if such a magnetic (if not magical) connection is not deemed implausible or problematic, the supposition of such a connection does not explain metaphysical practice, since metaphysicians do not have direct access to this connection: if they did, they would have nothing to disagree about. Rather, to the extent that there is genuine disagreement in the ontology room, this must reflect disagreement either about which methodological tools are best suited to indirectly get onto the domain of the ontological quantifier, or about whether, in a given case, these tools are appropriately applied. Either way, the supposition of a distinguished ontological quantifier does no work that wouldn't be better done by simply maintaining, as standard metaphysical practice assumes, that in ontological contexts language gets out of the way; then getting on with the task of identifying and appropriately applying methodological tools suited to discover the nature and structure of reality.

The third account, according to which certain quantifiers are indeterminate but subject to pragmatic extension, also fails to make plausible sense of metaphysical practice and disagreement. On this view, metaphysicians might aim to, and disagree about how to, appropriately extend an indeterminate quantifier. But if these extensions are based on purely pragmatic considerations, then what we have here is investigation into and disagreement about what it is most useful for us to take to exist, as opposed to investigation into and disagreement about what really does exist. Metaphysics involves the latter, not the former – at least for all anyone here or elsewhere has yet established.

Let me now propose an alternative account of the connection between quantifiers, ontological or otherwise, and existential facts.⁷ The account starts with the plausible

7 The account generalizes in obvious ways to treat the connection between any representational entities and any metaphysical facts.

supposition, in opposition to both insubstantialist and optimist accounts of the connection, that there is a serious, though perhaps superable, gap between language and reality. We use language, in various contexts, in an attempt, subject to perpetual revision, to articulate and accurately express truths about different aspects of reality, where the latter exist as prior and hopefully accessible guides to our talk of such aspects. It is likely that all of the languages that are typically under discussion in these contexts – ordinary, mathematical, scientific and metaphysical – are very far from having reached a point of determinate and stable articulation. Consequently, it is highly likely that the quantificationally implicated concepts and terms in these theories are to some extent indeterminate. In that case, not just metaphysics but other domains of inquiry can and should be seen as engaging in ongoing attempts to refine our concepts and terms so as to more accurately and articulately describe the world. Such an understanding of the connection between the quantifier (or associated constant terms) and the existential facts answers Yablo's question (520) concerning how it could be indeterminate whether '2' referred, if 2 determinately existed.

The alternative account correspondingly takes the quantifiers at issue in metaphysical and other discourse typically to be to some extent indeterminate.⁸ To this extent it departs from the first two accounts, and overlaps with the third in supposing that part of what metaphysicians aim to do is figure out how to appropriately extend (or revise, for that matter) the meaning of the quantifier(s) and other relevant terms. However, it crucially departs from the supposition of the third account (inherited, it seems, from Carnap's preferred treatment of supposedly external questions) that any such extensions are made on primarily pragmatic grounds. Rather, the supposition is that these extensions or revisions are appropriately taken (fallibly, prior to the end of inquiry, but with luck increasingly accurately) to track the structure of metaphysical reality, in ways not different, in principle, from those characteristic of scientific and other reality-based investigations. It also rejects the supposition that the indeterminacy at issue renders the associated discourse fatally defective: like practitioners in other fields, metaphysicians have a shared project and a shared language, which while in respects indeterminate and subject to revision – just as the meanings of 'mass' and 'set' have turned out to be – is determinate enough for communication and investigation to occur. Ontological disagreement, in particular, is appropriately understood as disagreement about what is in the extension of 'exists', or the domain of the existential quantifier. More generally, on the present view, metaphysical investigations aim to determine not what our terms *do* say about the world, but rather what our terms *should* say about the world.

This account of the relation between the quantifier(s) and existential facts – that is, as an ongoing work-in-progress of world-oriented accommodation – crucially hinges on a positive outcome to what may be the core open question in metametaphysics, concerning the viability of metaphysical methodology. But if things work out well – and at present it appears that metaphysics, as well as other disciplines whose data

8 It is thus incorrect, by my lights, to characterize ontological realism as the view that 'every unproblematic ontological assertion has an objective and determinate truth value' (Chalmers *et al.*, 92).

enter into metaphysical theorizing, continues to make advances – then the alternative account would provide a framework for understanding how metaphysicians conceive of the relation between language and reality, in a way not rendering this connection either stipulated, automatic or largely pragmatic.

5. *Directions for Future Metametaphysical Research*

The moral to be drawn from consideration of the previous questions is that, whether one is inclined towards pessimism or optimism, when doing metametaphysics one should avoid putting the representational cart before the worldly horse. As above, Quine's criterion of ontological commitment is only incidentally semantic: no metaphysics in, no metaphysics out. Similarly for Carnap's pessimistic characterization of metaphysics: no epistemology in, no metametaphysics out. The heavy focus on semantics is moreover positively problematic: first, in encouraging neglect of more pressing issues pertaining to metaphysical methodology; second, in encouraging a view of metaphysics as strangely isolated from other fields of inquiry; third, in introducing, as a 'degenerating problem shift', distracting attention to linguistic distinctions and questions, concerning the individuation, interpretation and translation of languages; the nature of meaning and its relation to truth and reference; the taxonomy of varieties of verbal dispute; the status of various quantifiers as indeterminate, context-dependent, relativist, multi-sorted; and so on. Hence it is that much discussion in this volume is ultimately beside the metametaphysical point.

That said, more promising directions for future research can be discerned in several contributions. I'll mention three of the most promising here.

Bennett's paper directly engages with the crucial question of whether the methodology of metaphysics is up to the task. She considers two metaphysical debates: first, over whether there may be coincident material objects (e.g. Lump and Goliath); second, over whether objects ever or never compose an object that is their mereological sum. In each case, a 'low-ontology' view (one-thingism, nihilism) contrasts with a 'high-ontology' view (two-thingism, compositionism); and the pattern of debate often takes the form of high-ontologists downplaying their additional ontology as fairly 'innocent', while low-ontologists up-play the expressive power of their view as capable of saying whatever needs to be said. As the score is usually kept, it is assumed that if low-ontologists can accommodate all the relevant facts/truths, then they win on grounds of greater ontological parsimony. It is unclear whether low-ontologists really can accommodate all the relevant facts. But even granting the requisite expressive power, Bennett notes that low-ontologists must pay for their parsimony by introducing elements beyond those high-ontologists accept, at either the level of ontology or ideology; for example, the nihilist must accept complex relations or predicates (e.g. *being arranged table-wise*) that the compositionalist needn't accept. From the perspective of overall parsimony, then, high- and low-ontologists are on a par.

Bennett takes these considerations to suggest that the debates have reached epistemic impasse: there are no grounds for choosing between the competing positions, and so no point in continuing debate. But as I interpret her results, they counsel a different conclusion. It's no secret that low-ontologists must often engage in contortions to accommodate desired truths in their preferred metaphysical terms; if there's no real gain in parsimony then there's no point in engaging in such contortions, and

we should stick with the more straightforward high-ontology view.⁹ At any rate, Bennett's discussion makes clear that much work remains in clarifying, refining and assessing the standards and methodology of metaphysics. Pessimists would do well to develop Bennett's (not to mention Carnap's) methodological concerns, as opposed to spinning their dialectical wheels characterizing metaphysics in terms metaphysicians won't recognize and needn't accept.

Schaffer's suggestion that metaphysics is concerned not just with what exists, but with what is fundamental and how it is related to what is non-fundamental, also targets a crucial area of future investigation. Though ontologists in the Quinean tradition have focused mainly on what exists, Schaffer's suggestion, and his related observation that '[w]hat one ought to have is the strongest theory (generating the most derivative entities) on the simplest basis (from the fewest substances)' (361) will sound familiar to the many metaphysicians who focus on grounding questions – as witness the large literature concerning dependency relations between entities treated by the special and more fundamental sciences, and associated debates concerning the nature and varieties of reduction, emergence, supervenience, functional or causal realization, and the determinable-determinate relation; not to mention the usual Boolean, mereological and set-theoretic resources to which ontologists are somewhat more prone to appeal. Given such an array of options for understanding grounding, it is unclear what motivation there is for supposing, as Schaffer does (after considering and rejecting one option: supervenience), that grounding is a metaphysical primitive. Such primitive appeals do little to illuminate the structure of fundamental or non-fundamental reality, and similarly for the appeals to 'naturalness', 'priority', 'distinguished structure', 'reference magnetism', 'eligibility' and other purportedly primitive notions currently ubiquitous in discussions of ontology, both fundamental and non-fundamental. Optimists would do well to explore more illuminating and substantive ways of characterizing the perhaps diverse natures of and relations between fundamental and non-fundamental entities, especially if they aim to coax any skittish neo-Carnapians over to their side.

Finally, McDaniel's contemporary introduction of the Heideggerian notion of ways of being is intriguing, and deserves further exploration. The interesting question here is not whether there are multiple ontologically distinguished ('perfectly natural') quantifiers, but rather questions such as: How, and how finely, are ways of being individuated? What ways of being are there? What justifies belief in a given way of being? How are ways of being related? Can a single entity participate in more than one way of being? McDaniel briefly considers certain of these questions – suggesting, in particular, that besides the paradigm ways of being associated with *being concrete* and *being abstract*, it might be that 'the merely possible exist in a fundamentally different way than the actual', which distinction would make sense both of intuitions that the actual world is non-indexically special, and of its seeming to be the case that '[t]he epistemology of the possible and the actual is fundamentally different: we can know a

9 Some (e.g. Sider, above) suggest that ordinary language or intuition provides little basis for choosing between metaphysical theories: 'Match with ordinary usage and belief sometimes plays a role in this assessment, but typically not a dominant one' (385). But where a metaphysical theory targets a phenomenon about which there is existing usage (as with the debates Bennett considers) a non-trivial degree of conformity seems required to ensure the target is hit. In any case, a weak advantage is still an advantage.

priori that there is a merely possible donkey, but we cannot know a priori that there is an actual talking donkey' (315). Here we see hints of the sorts of (intuitive, epistemological) considerations that can motivate distinct ways of being, and indication that a single entity may participate in multiple ways of being (as, e.g. both concrete and merely possible). One hopes for more, from McDaniel or others, along such properly metametaphysical lines.¹⁰

The University of Toronto
Toronto
Canada M5S 1A1
jessica.m.wilson@utoronto.ca

References

- Carnap, R. 1950–56. Empiricism, semantics, and ontology. In *Meaning and Necessity*, 205–21. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Chalmers, D., D. Manley and R. Wasserman, eds 2009. *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hirsch, E. 2002. Quantifier Variance and Realism. *Philosophical Issues* 12: 51–73.
- Quine, W.V. 1951a. On Carnap's views on ontology. *Philosophical Studies* 2: 65–72.
- Quine, W.V. 1951b. Ontology and ideology. *Philosophical Studies* 2: 11–15.
- Yablo, S. 2000. A paradox of existence. In *Empty Names, Fiction and the Puzzles of Non-Existence*, eds A. Everett and T. Hofweber, 275–312. Stanford: CSLI Publications.

¹⁰ Thanks to Stephen Biggs, Benj Hellie, Adam Murray and Chris Tillman for helpful comments.